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The Sir William Luce Memorial Lecture

20 June 2013

Dā'irat al-Mahdī: Money, Faith and Politics in Sudan

by

Fergus Nicoll¹



Leading al-Mahdī family personalities at Jazīra Abā, 14 February 1926
'Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī at the front, with 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl to his left
(SAD.1/28/11)

Introduction

The story of the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī* – al-Mahdī Inc. – is one of a triangle of power: religion, politics and money. Its evolution during the turbulent early 20th century was affected by what had happened before, not least the Mahdist wars of recent memory, and the impact of its enormous growth and political influence in the period before Sudan's independence in 1956 is still felt today. The *Dā'irat al-Mahdī* was the first agricultural company in Sudan whose management,

¹ The author would like to thank Mrs Jane Hogan, Senior Assistant Keeper at the Sudan Archive, Professor Martyn Evans, Principal of Trevelyan College, and Professor James Piscatori, Head of the School of Government and International Affairs, for their assistance and hospitality during his tenure of the Luce Fellowship.

administrative staff and workforce were exclusively Sudanese – and it grew beyond cotton growing to embrace industrial production, livestock, a substantial property portfolio and newspaper ownership. But above all, the legacy of the *Dā'ira* was social and political: as al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq has written, 'what distinguished the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī* ... was the nature of the circumstances that had led to its establishment' and its role during the 'evolution of the first political pluralism in the country ... [as] the financier for the activities of the *Anṣār* and the Umma Party'.²

The Arabic word *dā'ira* itself simply means 'circle', but context gives it a useful flexibility. In politics, *dā'irat al-intikhābāt* is an 'electoral circle', a constituency. In the context of Sufi devotion, *dā'irat al-ẓikr* signifies a 'circle of devotion', joined in communal prayer or recitation. And in business, *dā'ira* has the sense of 'enterprise', perhaps on the lines of a round table in the boardroom. Where these 'circles' all overlap, in an individual or a group of people, the combination of financial muscle, spiritual commitment and political unity makes for a powerful force, in opposition to colonial rule or to indigenous military rule, or in a democratic majority.

The second part of the name ties this triple force squarely to the al-Mahdī clan, whose name arose from the claim of *al-sheikh* Muḥammad Aḥmad 'Abdallah to be *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*, the 'Expected Guide' who would reunite the Muslim global community ahead of the appearance of the Prophet Jesus and the End of Days.³ A well-educated religious leader, Muḥammad Aḥmad launched a *jihād* in 1881, rallied Sudan's tribes and drove out Sudan's Egyptian colonial occupiers four years later. In claiming the status of *mahdī*, he placed himself as direct successor to the Prophet Muḥammad – *khalīfat rasūl Allah* – and so above the entire hierarchy of the Ottoman caliphate, including the state-sponsored religious and legal scholars in Sudan known collectively as *al-'ulamā'*.

The Mahdī's own family paid a high price for this mission. There were many fatalities in that era of *jihād* in the early 1880s, then in the further war of the late 1890s, when Britain invaded Sudan, and again in post-independence political violence. The Mahdī's three brothers, Muḥammad, Hāmid and 'Abdallah,

² al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *'Ilāqāt al-intāḥ al-zirā'īa fī mashārī' dā'irat al-Mahdī* ('Agricultural Means of Production in the Schemes of the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī*'), (Omdurman: Dirāsāt Istrātījīa, 2000), p. 56.

³ Fergus Nicoll, *The Sword of the Prophet: The Mahdi of Sudan and the Death of General Gordon* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004).

all died, as did his three deputies (*khulafāʾ*). Of the Mahdī's own sons, Muḥammad, al-Bushra, al-Fāḍl, al-Ṣiddīq, al-Ṭayyib and al-Ṭāhir were all killed in conflict, executed or died of illness while incarcerated. That left just two sons, 'Alī and 'Abd-al-Raḥman – and the question of who would inherit the title of *imām*, or spiritual guide of the Mahdī's extended community.



al-Bushra al-Mahdī, 'Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī and al-Fāḍl al-Mahdī, al-Shukkāba, August 1899
(SAD.A1/191)

'Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī's early years

The story of the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī* began 34 years before its formal licensing, as Britain consolidated its grip over central and eastern Sudan. In August 1899, 'Abd-al-Raḥman, posthumous youngest son of the Mahdī, was with two of his brothers, al-Bushra and al-Fāḍl, at al-Shukkāba, near Wad Medani. After British troops intercepted what they believed to be an attempt to mobilise a counter-strike against occupation forces, al-Bushra and al-Fāḍl were shot by firing squad, following a summary court martial on charges of inciting resistance.⁴ 'Abd-al-Raḥman, recovering from a bullet wound in his shoulder, was taken under the wing of Muḥammad Ṭaha Shinqetti at Jazīrat al-Fīl, not far from al-Shukkāba, and

⁴ Report by Major H.G. Fitton of Military Intelligence, *Sudan Intelligence Report* 64 (18 July to 31 August 1899), p. 2.

there the boy continued his traditional education.⁵ All the older surviving male members of his family – including his now only brother, ‘Alī, were sent to prison in Wadi Halfa, Sudan’s northernmost town – or at Rashīd, in the Egyptian delta, where many died of tuberculosis and other symptoms of official neglect.⁶

In 1908, as he entered his teens, ‘Abd-al-Raḥman was forced by the British colonial authorities to move to Omdurman, under the close surveillance of the Intelligence Department. The boy brought with him an entire extended family of 72 dependents: widows and orphans of his father, brothers and uncles, and the relatives of those still in prison. A note from late December 1908 instructs Richard More, a Khartoum-based government Inspector, to issue 25 Egyptian pounds to build a compound of homes for the family.⁷ ‘Abd-al-Raḥman himself was taken under the guidance of two leading legal scholars, the Muftī of Sudan, Sheikh al-Ṭayyib Aḥmad Hāshim, and the President of the Board of ‘*Ulamā*’, Muḥammad al-Badawī.⁸ This was a deliberate attempt to bring the symbol of religious rebellion under the control of the orthodox Islamic establishment.

This was a threadbare existence, in which ‘Abd-al-Raḥman was an ‘anxious suppliant for official doles on which he and his numerous dependents could subsist’, eking out a meagre allowance provided by the British.⁹ In October 1909, Robin Bailey, a new appointee to the Sudan Political Service, was taken on a tour of Omdurman by the local District Commissioner:

He led the way through squalid lanes to an insignificant mud hut and rapped on the door with his riding crop. Out came an

⁵ ‘The Forgotten Generation’, in K.D.D. Henderson Papers, Sudan Archive, University of Durham (henceforth SAD), 661/4, f.35. Mubārak ‘Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl recalled seeing the scar in his great-uncle’s shoulder; interview, 8 May 2013.

⁶ In his memoirs, ‘Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī recalled the harsh treatment meted out to family members held captive by the British at Wadi Halfa in northern Sudan, where ‘the cold, shortage of food and diseases decimated all my brothers ... who died, one after the other, of tuberculosis’; al-Sādiq al-Mahdī (ed.), *Jihād fī sabīl al-istiqlāl* (Khartoum: Government Press, 1966), p. 12. See also Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim, ‘The Policy of the Condominium Government towards the Mahdist Political Prisoners, 1898-1932’, *Sudan Notes and Records* 55 (1974): 33-45.

⁷ Inspectorate-General to Intelligence, 29 December 1908, in G.F. Thomas Papers, SAD 321/5 (no folio). On R.E. More, see Harold MacMichael, *Sudan Political Service, 1899-1956* (Oxford: Oxonian Press, n.d.), p. 11.

⁸ Richard Hill, *Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan* (Oxford, OUP, 1969), pp. 253 and 354.

⁹ Symes to Lampson, 13 May 1935; National Archives, FO 371/19096 (no folio). On Symes, see ‘Monthly Return of Senior Officials, Sudan Government, and British Officers Temporarily Employed in Sudan Government Service, Showing Appointments & Stations on the 1st March, 1914, and Probable Moves during the Month’; Durham University Library, Sud.A.Ref PK 1543 SUD.

obsequious, sorry looking youth in soiled clothes. He was the Mahdiis [*sic*] son. He had no means of livelihood and received a compassionate grant of a few pounds a month.¹⁰

In the first decade of the 20th century, such abject conditions were shared by many surviving Mahdists, by anyone, in fact, who was part of a community that was 'disbanded and prohibited from reforming'.¹¹ But there were two specific reasons why 'Abd-al-Rahman as an individual was kept in deliberate poverty and obscurity. One was personal. Rudolf von Slatin, an Austrian, had been one of many European and American mercenaries working for the Egyptian occupation. As Governor of Darfur, he was defeated by the Mahdī's forces in the west and forced to surrender. He spent the next 11 years as a prisoner, mostly in Omdurman under the eye of the Mahdī's autocratic successor, the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi. Slatin eventually escaped – and published (with no little help from British military intelligence) a lurid account of the horrors of the Khalīfa's rule – a book that became one of the 'set texts' for early British military and civilian officials working in Sudan.¹²

When Britain completed the second conquest of Sudan in 1899, Slatin found a job as Inspector-General.¹³ He lost no time in suppressing anyone with links to the administration that had kept him in chains.¹⁴ One account claims that Slatin 'succumbed to fits of black depression' and as a result 'incalculated [*sic*] an unjustified fear of a Mahdist revival and urged the necessity of repressing the actual Mahdist tribe.'¹⁵ Slatin's biographer, Richard Hill, noted that the policy towards the Mahdists was 'of necessity repressive' but insisted that Slatin 'set his

¹⁰ R.E.H. Bailey Papers, SAD 533/4/27.

¹¹ Richard Hill, *Slatin Pasha* (Oxford: OUP, 1965), p. 90.

¹² Peter Woodward, 'In the Footsteps of Gordon: The Sudan Government and the Rise of Sayyid Sir Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi, 1915-1935', *African Affairs* 84/334 (1985), p. 40. See also Gabriel Warburg, 'The Wingate Literature Revisited: The Sudan as Seen by Members of the Sudan Political Service during the Condominium: 1899-1956', *Middle Eastern Studies* 41/3 (2005), pp. 373-389.

¹³ This office (*mufattish al-'amm*) was separate from Intelligence (*mukhabarāt*).

¹⁴ 'Memorandum on the Policy of the Sudan Government towards the Mahdist Cult', by R. Davies, A.D.I. [Acting Director of Intelligence] Khartoum, dated 11 December 1926, National Archives, FO 371/12374, p. 3. Ned Mayall described the process by which surviving sons of the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi and their families were transported up the White Nile and dumped in rudimentary settlements in isolated bush-country, where they were terrorised by lions; R.C. Mayall Papers, SAD 851/7, ff. 17-19.

¹⁵ R.E.H. Bailey Papers, SAD 533/4, f. 23.

face firmly against persecution while being very strict at times with the younger generation and particularly with the sons of the Mahdī and Khalifa'.¹⁶

One important aspect of Slatin's suppression policy was to insist that 'Abd-al-Raḥman be called strictly by given name and patronymic – and emphatically not given the special honorific *al-Sayyid*, which denotes descent from the family of the Prophet Muḥammad and which would have identified him as his father's spiritual and political successor.¹⁷ As *de facto* head of the family, 'Abd-al-Raḥman was the living representative of a substantial religious force – what remained from the huge following commanded by his father. Similarly proscribed, then, was the little prayer-book called *al-Rātib*, containing quotations from the Koran and Sufi devotional declarations to Allah. For the Maḥdī, who led a military, social and spiritual *jihād*, the *Rātib* was a powerful communal binding agent: all the more reason for the British – and their collaborators among the Sudanese religious elite – to fear its power in the hands of the Maḥdī's heir.¹⁸ For many years after the British occupation, even having a copy of the *Rātib* was banned – and reading from it in public was a criminal offence.¹⁹

In terms of allies, the British were much more inclined to trust people like *al-Sayyid* 'Alī al-Mīrghanī and *al-Sharīf* Yūsuf al-Hindī, heads of the Khatmīa and Hindīa sects respectively.²⁰ The latter was a staunch supporter of the Anglo-Egyptian government, even though he had served the Maḥdī and his successor. al-Mīrghanī, by contrast, had always maintained his loyalty to the previous Egyptian occupation, in the face of the Maḥdī's *jihād*. Indeed, the Khatmīa were among a substantial minority who rejected the call of the Maḥdī and had no reason to further the aspirations of his son. As Lord Kitchener himself had put it just a year after the conquest had been achieved: 'The task before us all ... is to acquire the

¹⁶ Hill, *Slatin Pasha*, p. 139. The policy was also hypocritical, as Slatin was on record as saying that the death of the Khalifa in 1899 had 'implied the end of the Mahdist movement' and was 'equivalent to the instant and permanent pacification of the Sudan'; *St James's Budget*, 8 December 1899, and *New York Evening Post*, 14 December 1899, in R.C. von Slatin Papers, SAD 410/19, ff. 17 and 19.

¹⁷ Letter dated 28 December 1908, in G.F. Thomas Papers, SAD 321/5 (no folio).

¹⁸ When the Intelligence Department asked a 'learned Mohammedan lawyer' to vet the *Rātib* for seditious content, he commented: 'I was greatly astonished to find that it was void in every respect of any call to Mahdism and I began to think his object was to call the people to follow him as Sheikh of a *tariqa* and not as the Maḥdī'; *The Religious Confraternities (Tariqas)*, by C.A. Willis, Sudan Intelligence Department, 1922, p. 17.

¹⁹ Gabriel Warburg, 'Religious Policy in the Northern Sudan: 'Ulama' and Sufism 1899-1918', *Asian and African Studies* 7 (1971), pp. 89-119.

²⁰ Gabriel Warburg, 'Sectarian Politics in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan: The Neo-Mahdism Reconsidered', *Sudan Notes and Records* 3 (1999), pp. 89-104.

confidence of the people ... by being thoroughly in touch with the better class of native, through whom we may hope gradually to influence the whole population.'²¹ As for 'Abd-al-Raḥman, as Richard Hill noted, the government 'regarded him as a poor third and scarcely noticed his existence.'²²



'Abd-al-Qādir Muḥammad wad Habūba under guard, al-Jazīra, 1908
(SAD.A38/173)

There were indeed serial rebellions during the early years of British rule – generally small and isolated, but making sure that the fear of a wider uprising never quite went away. Among the most serious revolts were those led by 'Alī 'Abd-al-Karīm in 1900, by Sharīf Muḥammad al-Amīn in 1903, by 'Abd-al-Qādir Muḥammad wad Habūba in 1908, and by Muḥammad Sayyid Muḥammad in 1919.²³ The British certainly knew that there were many tens, probably hundreds of thousands of people who had heard the Mahdī's call in the mid-1880s and

²¹ G.M.A. Bakheit, 'British Administration and Sudanese Nationalism, 1919-1939' (Cambridge: PhD thesis, 1965), p. 24.

²² Hill, *Slatin Pasha*, p. 137.

²³ Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim, 'Mahdist Risings against the Condominium Government in the Sudan, 1900-1927', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 12/3 (1979), pp. 440-71. On 'Alī 'Abd-al-Karīm, see 'Note on the Millennium sect in the Sudan', in A.R.C. Bolton Papers, SAD 624/4, ff. 2-3. On Sharīf Muḥammad al-Amīn, see Appendix A: 'Rise and Fall of a new Mahdi in Kordofan', in *Sudan Intelligence Report* 110, September 1903, pp. 2-3. On 'Abd-al-Qādir Muḥammad wad Habūba, see Hill, *Biographical Dictionary*, p. 14.

were still alive in the early 20th century. The Mahdī had called them *Anṣār*, ‘followers’, a deliberate reference to those who had followed the Prophet Muḥammad in his lifetime. Those who travelled from far and wide to swear loyalty and serve the cause he called *muhajirīn* – they had emulated the *hijra* of the Prophet and his successor the Mahdī – and these two terms will crop up again in the world of what became known as ‘neo-Mahdism’.

Farming begins at Jazīra Abā

Jazīra Abā, or Abā Island, about 150 miles south of Khartoum, is the heartland of the Mahdist movement: in the 1880s, under colonial rule and today. When ‘Abd-al-Raḥman was young, the island was densely forested. His first assertion of independence from Slatin’s lock-down in Omdurman came when he was given permission to travel to Jazīra Abā to supervise the clearance of a patch of land he had been granted two years earlier, though not allowed to visit.²⁴ In his short history, *Jazīra Abā and its Role in the Sudanese Renaissance*, al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī wrote that it was wad Habūba’s revolt just months earlier that had ‘confirmed to the foreign rulers that under the surface the feelings of the *Anṣār* were strong and potentially explosive, and the policy of pressurising them would lead to more such explosions’.²⁵

Slatin wrote to his colleagues in the Intelligence branch in January 1909 to ask: ‘Will you give AbdelRahman Ibn Mohd Ahmed a free pass & back to Fasch Shoya [a railway halt on the west bank of the White Nile facing the island]?’²⁶ Emery at Intelligence agreed, writing in turn to the Governor of White Nile Province: ‘AbdelRahman son of the Mahdi proceeds to Fochi Shoya on 24th inst & has been given free warrants ... from this office for himself & two servants. He is anxious to be granted a loan to work a Sakia [*sāqiya*, a mechanical water-wheel

²⁴ al-Ṣiddiq ‘Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *‘Ilāqāt al-intāj al-zirā‘a*, pp. 61-2, describes how ‘Abd-al-Raḥman had been given permission to farm the plot in 1906 but had to wait two years to be allowed to travel to oversee the land clearance. This section also describes ‘Abd-al-Raḥman’s ‘emotional attachment’ to Jazīra Abā and quotes his expression of determination to return to ‘the base of my activities to forge relations with the *Anṣār* and to mobilise them around the teachings of religion, as well as reviving the heritage of their forefathers’.

²⁵ al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī, *al-Jazīra Abā wa-dawrahā fī nahdhat al-Sūdānī* (‘Jazīra Abā and its Role in the Sudanese Renaissance’) (Khartoum: Government Press, 1965), p. 7.

²⁶ Letter dated 18 January 1909, in G.F. Thomas Papers, SAD 321/5 (no folio).

powered by livestock] of his in Aba Island, & I shall be much obliged if assistance can be rendered to him.’²⁷

So began the period known to *Anṣār* as *al-balṭa*, after the axe used to clear woods and scrubland.²⁸ The combination of logging and farming served ‘Abd-al-Raḥman well for several years, weaning him off government handouts and loans and enabling him to embark on a steady expansion of his smallholdings. It was not entirely straightforward: other islanders who were already grazing the land allocated to ‘Abd-al-Raḥman disputed his right to take it. Finally, the British Inspector at Kosti ruled that any land satisfactorily developed at the end of five years would be ‘Abd-al-Raḥman’s in perpetuity.²⁹ So, in November 1910, Slatin wrote again to Intelligence: ‘Abdel Rahman ebn Mohd Ahmed leaves for Abba to ... improve his cultivation – can you give a loan of 6 pounds and deduct from his salary gradually.’³⁰

By late 1914, these winter trips from Omdurman to Jazīra Abā had become routine, each lasting around a month, usually with free travel passes courtesy of British Intelligence. Surveillance, however, was not relaxed. A note from the Intelligence Department in November 1914 to the Governor of White Nile Province at al-Dueim records that ‘Abd-al-Raḥman was ‘proceeding to visit his cultivation’ on Jazīra Abā. ‘He has been instructed to report himself to you & to Inspector Kosti. ... He has on this occasion been especially instructed as to his manner of behaviour & I trust yourself & the Inspector Kosti will be satisfied ... without letting AbdelRahman observe that he is being watched.’³¹

While his family and early followers on the island became self-sufficient in food, ‘Abd-al-Raḥman also secured contracts to sell his timber to the Sudan Railway Department, whose trains were left short of fuel by the diversion of

²⁷ Letter dated 19 January 1909, in *ibid*. In subsequent correspondence on the same theme, the Intelligence department asks on 3 August 1910 ‘whether the presence of A. Mohd. Ahmed is really necessary’. The following day, C.E. Lyall, Assistant Governor, White Nile Province, replies cautiously: ‘It is certainly advisable that AbdelRahman Mohd Ahmed should go to Aba Island & superintend the erection of Saquias there. If he really intends to erect them’; in *ibid*.

²⁸ al-Ṣiddīq ‘Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *‘Ilāqāt al-intāj al-zirā’i’a*, p. 62.

²⁹ al-Ṣadiq al-Mahdī, *al-Jazīra Abā*, p. 8. In the aftermath of the British occupation, the question of land ownership was a priority area. The first Governor-General, Lord Kitchener, warned as early as March 1899 that ‘ordinances will shortly be issued providing for adjudication’ on conflicting land claims, and that, ‘pending such adjudication, no intending vendor of land in the Sudan is in a position to give a good and valid title to such land’; *The Sudan Gazette*, No. 1, 7 March 1899, p. 4. The first Title to Lands Ordinance (1899) was issued by proclamation two months later; *The Sudan Gazette*, No. 2, 27 May 1899, p. 1. Such legislation was periodically revisited during the early years of Condominium rule.

³⁰ Slatin to A.D.I., 19 November 1910, in G.F. Thomas Papers, SAD 321/5 (no folio).

³¹ Letter dated 22 November 1914, in *ibid*.

timber to the Western Front, and to government steamers using the White Nile on the north-south route – to the irritation of the Forestry Department, which believed it had prior claim to the timber.³²

We lent 'Abd-al-Raḥman 20 Egyptian pounds worth of tools to fulfil a timber contract, only to find that he kept the tools, reneged on the contract and sold the timber to two other government departments at a greatly enhanced price. Having regard to the political status of this person, I should be glad to know how far I may go in compelling him to pay his debts.³³

Four years later, the contract was still running: the Governor-General's own steamer moored at Jazīra Abā's 'wood station' to replenish her 'barge of ship wood' for the journey south up the White Nile.³⁴



Boats loaded with timber, White Nile Province
(SAD.878/6/14)

³² Ṣalāh Ḥassan, *al-Sayyid 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl al-Mahdī* (Atbara: Wādī al-Nīl University, PhD thesis, n.d.), p. 61.

³³ Letter dated 18 June 1917, in G.F. Thomas Papers, SAD 321/5 (no folio).

³⁴ 'Governor-General's inspection tour South of Khartoum', entry for 6-7 March 1921, in L. Martin Papers, SAD 627/3, f. 3.

Collaboration or manipulation?

This ability to work the system was an early sign of 'Abd-al-Raḥman's core pragmatism: the defining principle of neo-Mahdism, which one Sudanese scholar has likened simply to 'the projection of his personal influence, wealth and prestige'.³⁵ Young, not yet centre-stage but already comfortable, 'Abd-al-Raḥman gave all the appearance of collaboration with the tarbush-wearing colonial establishment — but at the same time engaged in a covert but systematic development of the family and the growing community of *Anṣār*. In fact, it would be hard to state the position any more clearly than 'Abd-al-Raḥman did himself in conversation with Reginald Davies of the Intelligence Department in September 1924: Davies quoted him as stressing that

all the Mahdists whom he controlled were pro-Government to a man and that this attitude was due solely to his influence. He had imposed this attitude on them, he said with great emphasis, solely because he regarded the English as the power which could best serve the interests of the sect.³⁶

This was a period when the British were turning increasingly to what was called 'Native Administration', which relied on tribal figures — graced with approved titles such as *sheikh*, *nāzir*, and *omda* — who carried out much of the local administration on behalf of their conquerors.³⁷ The British were anxious when 'Abd-al-Raḥman tried to woo these rival indigenous authorities to his own cause. A report from Ian Bruce-Gardyne, Assistant District Commissioner at al-Geteina in Kordofan in May 1923 describes 'Abd-al-Raḥman's efforts to increase his influence among local dignitaries by inviting them to a meeting. The official perceptively sums up the inherent risks:

It seemed to me ... impossible that he who does not hold any apparent official position could be allowed to invite any one working for the Govt. away from his duty without consulting the

³⁵ Bakheit, 'British Administration', p. 117.

³⁶ 'Note of a Conversation with El Seiyed Abdel Rahman El Mahdi, 14.9.24', by R. Davies, A.D.I., in National Archives, FO 141/573/1, f. 53.

³⁷ Tim Niblock, *Class and Power in Sudan: The Dynamics of Sudanese Politics, 1898-1985* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), pp. 52-5.

local authority. Up till then it would have been impossible to have allowed two of the above omdas to be absent without severely hindering Govt. work, while to refuse leave to attend the summons of a noted religious leader was to put an unfair strain on their loyalty. I was afraid too that ... a large assembly organized under their chiefs was being gathered under one man, who would become their “uncrowned king” if not more.³⁸

As early as 1915, ‘Abd-al-Raḥman was given the best possible opportunity to improve his position with the government. During the First World War, the government in Khartoum had to counter the threat posed by Turkey’s call for a pan-Islamic *jihād*, and called upon ‘leaders of popular Islam ... to utilise their influence in pacifying the populace’.³⁹ In other words, the British needed ‘Abd-al-Raḥman precisely for the religious status that it had been denying for the past 16 years – but, as Richard Hill put it, ‘This was no time to argue theological niceties’.⁴⁰ The war also removed Slatin, an Austrian, from the scene – and the rules began to change, albeit cautiously. Within three months, officials were using the title that Slatin had proscribed. In December the same year, George Iles at Wad Medani was alerted by the Assistant Director of Intelligence to an imminent trip by ‘Sayed Abdel Rahman, the son of the Mahdi, to the White and Blue Niles’, a mission ‘specially sanctioned by His Excellency the Governor-General. ... While granting every facility for this visit, I should be grateful if you would kindly keep him under eye –and his moves and statements, etc., reported secretly to me.’⁴¹

Touring the Jazīra region to reassure his fellow Sudanese that Britain was not waging a war against Islam looked like collaboration but it allowed ‘Abd-al-Raḥman to show himself to his followers – who naturally assumed that he had the endorsement of the British in reclaiming some version at least of his father’s leadership role. And ‘Abd-al-Raḥman justified his role in this campaign against Turkish propaganda with a reminder of the Ottoman Empire’s history in Sudan, seen in the Egyptian occupation of 1820-1885: ‘No-one should expect me to

³⁸ Report dated 30 May 1923, in I.M. Bruce-Gardyne Papers, SAD 478/13, f. 36. See also Gabriel Warburg, ‘British Policy towards the Ansar in Sudan: A Note on an Historical Controversy’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 33/4 (1997), pp. 675-92.

³⁹ Peter Woodward, *Sudan, 1898-1989: The Unstable State* (London: Lester Crook, 1990), p. 25.

⁴⁰ Hill, *Slatin Pasha*, p. 138.

⁴¹ Secret letter to G.E. Iles, dated 1 December 1915, in G.F. Thomas Papers, SAD 321/5 (no folio).

sympathise with the Turkish Sultan. The history of the Turks since they found their way to the Sudan had been written in the blood of my people and followers.’⁴²

This policy of quasi-collaboration secured him an audience with the King in London, a chestful of British honours, and the close, if not always trusting, attention of decades of imperial administrators. As early as 1921, ‘Abd-al-Raḥman was holding political meetings at his house; at one of these, a document ‘addressed to the two Condominium Governments’ was signed, in which the signatories stated that they ‘preferred to be under one only of the two partners ... i.e. the British’.⁴³ The historian Hasan Abdin called this ‘a tribute to the success and reciprocity of collaboration between a colonial regime and a “national aristocracy”’.⁴⁴ But al-Sayyid ‘Abd-al-Raḥman – as he was by now almost universally known, and increasingly openly acknowledged as *imām* of the *Anṣār* – had his own agenda, one of exploiting every opportunity to improve his position with the government.⁴⁵

He abstained from taking any active role in the 1916 British annexation of the Darfur Sultanate, despite the huge number of known Mahdist supporters in the west – or, more likely, because he knew that Darfur’s reintegration into Sudan proper would open access to a larger following. He also profited from increasingly open divisions between the ‘co-domini’, Britain and Egypt, always lining himself up as the loyal servant of the former. On 23 April 1919 and on 10 June 1924 – two peak periods for Egyptian nationalism and therefore British anxiety – ‘Abd-al-Raḥman was involved in collective declarations of loyalty to British rule. On the second occasion, he was the lead signatory, above the Mufti of Sudan but still, with disingenuous modesty, identified simply as a ‘Cultivator’.⁴⁶ Yet when Governor-General Sir Geoffrey Archer made an official visit to Jazīra Abā on 14 February 1926, officialdom in Khartoum was still so suspicious of ‘Abd-al-Raḥman

⁴² al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī, *Jihād fī sabīl al-istiqlāl*, pp. 21-2.

⁴³ Yusuf Bedri (tr.) and Peter Hogg (ed.), *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, Vol. 2 (London: Ithaca Press, 1980), p. 248.

⁴⁴ Hasan Abdin, *Early Sudanese Nationalism, 1919-1925* (Khartoum: KUP, 1985), pp. 19-20.

⁴⁵ There were limits to this recognition; Babikr Bedri describes a meeting with the Governor of Khartoum Province in 1921, at which the British official complained about the words ‘Peace upon him’ being appended to the name of ‘Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī on a collective petition: ‘The Government does not acknowledge the divinity of the Mahdi and does not allow “Peace upon him” to be written after his name’; Bedri and Hogg, *Babikr Bedri*, Vol. 2, p. 248.

⁴⁶ Appendix A in Bakheit, ‘British Administration’, p. 334.

that Archer's Council was able to engineer his resignation and force his return to London.⁴⁷

The failure of containment

British policy on neo-Mahdism was never consistent: each successive administration had both sympathisers and sceptics, who presented conflicting assessments. In November 1925, the Intelligence Department insisted that 'the movement is undoubtedly of a potentially dangerous character'. To 'remove him [ʿAbd-al-Raḥman] elsewhere' risked disturbances: better to 'treat him with firmness but also with the greatest personal consideration and respect, as the best means of preserving the loyalty of his followers.'⁴⁸ Back from the senior army commander in Sudan, Major-General Hubert Huddleston, came the riposte: 'A general Mahdist uprising postulates the presence of a Mahdi, who will come openly into the field, assume personal control, and be prepared to head his men in battle. These are not the characteristics of the present head of the Mahdist movement who is no warrior.'⁴⁹ The general almost certainly had no idea how accurately his assessment matched that of ʿAbd-al-Raḥman himself.

By the early 1920s, ʿAbd-al-Raḥman was already entertaining in style in his mansions in Khartoum, Omdurman and Jazīra Abā. By 1935, he was the owner of at least 15,000 acres – and the accounts from a third of that land showed an annual return of between 20,000 and 30,000 Egyptian pounds.⁵⁰ Inasmuch as there was any consistent British counter-strategy to resist this inexorable expansion, it was, as James Robertson later put it, that 'if he could be persuaded to devote his energies to agriculture and cotton growing, he might be less inclined to develop his religious and political influence throughout the country.'⁵¹

⁴⁷ Archer's own account of this debacle is in Sir Geoffrey Archer, *Personal and Historical Memoirs of an East African Administrator* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd Ltd., 1963), pp. 239-56.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Archer to Lord Lloyd, 18 November 1925, in National Archives, FO 141/573/1, ff. 91-2.

⁴⁹ 'Notes on the Possibility of a Mahdist Rising in the Sudan Necessitating the employment of External Reinforcements', by Maj.-Gen. Hubert Huddleston, 8 August 1926, in National Archives, FO 141/573/1, ff. 126-8. See also Henry Keown-Boyd, *Soldiers of the Nile: A Biographical History of the British Officers of the Egyptian Army 1882-1925* (Thornbury: Thornbury Press, 1996), p. 103.

⁵⁰ al-Ṣiddīq ʿAbd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *ʾIlāqāt al-intāj al-zirāʿīa*, p. 63.

⁵¹ Sir James Robertson, *Transition in Africa* (London: Hurst & Co., 1974), p. 33; see also Niblock, *Class and Power in Sudan*, pp. 50-1, on the commercial advantages accruing to strongly centralized movements.

Put more pithily by a neo-Mahdist writer, this amounted to a policy of ‘siege and distraction through commercial gain’.⁵² But precisely because he was not distracted, ‘Abd-al-Raḥman’s political and religious strength – which helped build and was then sustained by the edifice of the *Dā’irat al-Mahdī* – increased by manipulating the system. His own view was always couched in the pragmatic language of the trader: ‘If someone owes you money and offers you half, wouldn’t you take it and then press for more?’ That was his view on progress – both in terms of his personal status and, later, wider political rights for Sudanese.⁵³ In his memoir, the journalist Muḥammad Kheir al-Badawī called this ‘wisdom and cunning’: a revival of his father’s revolution but ‘free of religious obsessions’.⁵⁴



Construction of the Sennār Dam, 1923-5
(SAD.632/16/31)

Beginning of the cotton empire

The construction of the Sennār Dam on the Blue Nile in the 1920s was a pivotal moment for Sayyid ‘Abd-al-Raḥman. Not only did he secure lucrative sub-contracts for the timber needed to build workers’ accommodation, offices and

⁵² al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī, *al-Jazīra Abā*, p. 11.

⁵³ Interview with ‘Osmān Nuṣairi, 11 April 2013.

⁵⁴ Muḥammad Kheir al-Badawī, *Qīṭār al-‘amr: fī adab al-mu’ānasa wa’l-mujālasa* (‘Trains of My Life: On the Art of Affability and Chatting’), (no details), p. 135.

related dam infrastructure, but he was exposed for the first time to the revolutionary idea that cotton could be the making of Sudan – and any Sudanese in the business of cotton. At the dam's grand opening in January 1926, his was again the first name on a list of 'Distinguished Notabilities of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan'.⁵⁵ These dignitaries, noted *The Sudan Herald*, 'garbed in gorgeous robes heavy with decorations, made a vivid array of blue, gold and scarlet against a background of thousands of white robed natives who made the further bank of the canal appear a snow-clad hill dotted with coal.'⁵⁶

Just ten days after that ceremony, 'Abd-al-Raḥman secured a government loan of 4,500 Egyptian pounds to begin cotton cultivation on Jazīra Abā – a loan that was never repaid because, after he had held out for two years, friends in high places ensured that the loan became a gift, which 'should not be collected back from the Sayed'.⁵⁷ Further effective state subsidy followed when al-Sayyid 'Abd-al-Raḥman became a partner in the government cotton scheme at Qundāl, on the Blue Nile. Khartoum put in 28,000 pounds, 'Abd-al-Raḥman contributed 'general administration and supervision' – and the huge profits were shared.

To achieve their full potential, large cotton schemes demanded industrial-scale irrigation, and 'Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī become one of a small elite of private pump-station owners on the White Nile. In 1927, a nine-year-old application for permission to use water pumps was finally approved – another shift in the political winds in Khartoum – and the Sudan Cotton Growers' Association history confirms that this, 'the first private pump scheme in Sudan was started in 1929 at Aba Island'.⁵⁸ It was experimental, inasmuch as no-one had tried growing cotton on the White Nile before: the Sennār Dam channelled Blue Nile water to the massive, government-controlled Gezira Scheme.⁵⁹ But 'Abd-al-

⁵⁵ *Special Sudan Number of the African World: Commemorating the Official Opening of the Sennar Dam, January 21, 1926*, p. 13, in E.C.L. Flavell Papers, SAD 304/10.

⁵⁶ *The Sudan Herald: Sennar Dam Supplement*, 20 February 1926, p. 3, in H.C. Jackson Papers, SAD 423/3, f. 7.

⁵⁷ Governor-General to Financial Secretary, 2 February 1926, and Governor-General to Civil Secretary, 30 March 1928, cited in Bakheit, 'British Administration', p. 117.

⁵⁸ Sudan Cotton Growers' Association, *Private Cotton Estates in the Sudan* (Khartoum: Government Press, 1964), p. 3. al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *Ilāqāt al-intāḡ al-zirā'īa*, p. 63, says the pump application had been submitted in 1918. See also A.B. Zahlan and W.Y. Magar (eds.), *The Agricultural Sector of Sudan: Policy & Systems Studies* (London: Ithaca Press, 1986), p. 146.

⁵⁹ See Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 132, on the government's attempts to 'curtail [the] recruitment activities of private estate owners' who threatened the Gezira Scheme's labour pool.

Raḥman's initial 180-acre project on Jazīra Abā was a 'great success', delivering a healthy yield of long-fibre cotton.⁶⁰

This was the beginning of a rapid expansion and the birth of a multi-faceted business enterprise. Before long, al-Mahdī family farms – each headed by a leading member of the extended family – were not only growing but trading cotton, buying up the produce of smaller private schemes in the region that did not have their own processing facilities.⁶¹ So 'Abd-al-Raḥman and his extended family had control of both production and exchange, and the spectacular profits were re-invested in factories, oil mills, new trading partnerships or new agricultural ventures. Extra income came from the family's ginning plants – the biggest at Rabak – whose excess capacity was rented out to the smaller cotton schemes in the area.⁶² Another important role was as a finance house for local small-holders outside the family: al-Mahdī Inc. lent money for tractors, seed, small pumps, and so on – a 'means of empowerment for Sayyid 'Abd-al-Raḥman's followers', as one family member put it.⁶³

This expansion put 'Abd-al-Raḥman in the company of Sudan's merchant princes, most of whom were expatriates.⁶⁴ Gerasimos Contomichalos, a well-connected businessman and part of Sudan's large Greek community, was a particularly close associate.⁶⁵ Another prominent member of the Sudan Chamber of Commerce, Azīz Kafūri, sold him his first town-house in Khartoum as early as 1918.⁶⁶ Indeed, there are some who believe that the expatriate private business elite, many of them from the Levant and so collectively known to Sudanese as *al-*

⁶⁰ al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī. *al-Jazīra Abā*, p. 9.

⁶¹ Niblock, *Class and Power in Sudan*, p. 58, lists the small number of non-European merchants involved in both production and trade.

⁶² Fatima Babiker Mahmoud, *The Sudanese Bourgeoisie: Vanguard of Development?* (Khartoum: KUP, 1984), pp. 38 and 47.

⁶³ Interview with Mubārak 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl, 8 May 2013. This role as community financier continued until the 1950s: Abbas Ahmed Mohamad, *White Nile Arabs: Political Leadership and Economic Change* (London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology No. 53) (New Jersey: The Athlone Press, 1980), p. 167, notes that 'the most important commercial company which provides loans for the White Nile private schemes is the Mahdi Commercial Company'.

⁶⁴ Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, pp. 96-7, identifies the leading 'Greek, Egyptian, Armenian, and Middle Eastern' owners of private agricultural schemes, whose number 'rose from 13 in the 1920s to 244 in 1939'.

⁶⁵ For background on the Greek merchant community, focused on Contomichalos' uncle, see Gerasimos Makris and Endre Stiansen, 'Angelo Capato: A Greek Trader in the Sudan', *Sudan Studies* 21 (1998), pp. 10-18.

⁶⁶ Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim, 'The Development of Economic and Political Neo-Mahdism in the Sudan, 1926-1935', *Sudan Notes and Records* 58 (1977), p. 47.

Shuwām or ‘the Syrians’, were instrumental in building ‘Abd-al-Raḥman’s profile, perhaps investing in him as their own best chance for stability in some unpredictable era after the British.⁶⁷



Baling cotton at a ginning factory
(SAD.1/18/20)

‘Abd-al-Raḥman reaches out to the West

These growing projects demanded a huge labour force, and here Sayyid ‘Abd-al-Raḥman’s religious authority meshed well with his commercial concerns. Put simply, he could count on a massive number of people being willing to work for him for little beyond board and lodging, and the privilege of being close to the son of the Mahdi: ‘*belila wa baraka*’, as it has been put, ‘porridge and a blessing’.⁶⁸ This phenomenon was explained by al-Ṣiddīq ‘Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, author of the only published article on the *Dā’irat al-Mahdī*:

Psychological desire and a spirit of sectarian loyalty to Mahdism played a large part in prompting farmers to work with disregard for financial returns and turn a blind eye to any shortcomings. ...

⁶⁷ Muḥammad Khair al-Badawī, *Quṭār al-‘amr*, pp. 133.

⁶⁸ Robertson, *Transition in Africa*, p. 33.

For them, the migration meant the continuation of the cause of *jihād* and an extension of the Mahdist revolutionary movement.⁶⁹

As many as 15,000 people a year travelled from Kordofan, Darfur and beyond to the White Nile to work for Sayyid ‘Abd-al-Raḥman on this basis.⁷⁰ The scale of migration reveals that there was much more than employment involved. Throughout the 1920s, Sayyid ‘Abd-al-Raḥman reached out to his father’s large following in the west – newly accessible after the British annexation of Darfur. Access may also have been improved by the fact that ‘Abd-al-Raḥman’s mother was the niece of the ousted Sultan.⁷¹ al-Tijāni Muṣṭafa Muḥammad Sālih has recorded the extent of ‘Abd-al-Raḥman’s outreach among the Zaghāwa tribe in Darfur:

Many Zaghāwa answered the *imām*’s request to leave their homes and children and migrate to Jazīra Abā to learn the recitation of the *Rātib* and to worship in *Masjid al-Kūn*, which the *anṣār* believed to be particularly graceful. The majority of those Zaghāwa who made *hijra* had abandoned their possessions and families for the sake of religion and devoted themselves to the *dā’ira*. They worked as labourers in cotton and sorghum cultivation and in cutting firewood free of charge in the belief that they would be rewarded in the hereafter. ... [and] they considered those who remained at home and refused to join the *imām* as lax in religion.⁷²

Elsewhere in Darfur, the Sultan of Dār Masālīt, piqued by the loss of so many followers in the seasonal migration to Jazīra Abā – where they received only a modest amount of grain as reward for their labour – appealed to the British for help. According to one report,

⁶⁹ al-Ṣiddīq ‘Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *‘Ilāqāt al-intāj al-zirā’īa*, p. 57.

⁷⁰ Immigrants from the West also came to work for large government agricultural schemes, prompting irritation that workers were being siphoned off by ‘Abd-al-Raḥman; see G. Ayoub Balamoan, *Peoples and Economics in the Sudan, 1884 to 1956* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 240-7.

⁷¹ Interview with Mubārak ‘Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl, 8 May 2013.

⁷² Al- Tijāni Muṣṭafa Muḥammad Sālih, ‘Islam, Traditional Beliefs and Ritual Practices among the Zaghawa of the Sudan’ (University of St Andrews: PhD thesis, 1991), p. 131.

The Sultan ... expressed disgust that the religious leanings of his men should be exploited into providing slave labour for Sayyid 'Abd-al-Raḥman. He states that at Abba, according to religious precedent, his people are divided into Muhagirin and Ansar but that their treatment is the same: forced labour from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m.⁷³

The *imām* himself rejected the charge of exploitation, let alone slave labour. He insisted that the set-up was both paternalistic and positive:

The flood of *Anṣār* rushing to Jazīra Aba, abandoning homes, families and properties, did not do so to work in agriculture or other things. They came to hear a word from me, declaring the revolution against foreign rule. [But] I looked at matters from a different angle. I perceived the armed struggle as doomed to fail. I viewed discarding life as a defeat, which I did not accept because I saw it as my duty to preserve the heritage and legacy of Mahdism, so that this page of our history would not be lost. Their aim was *hijra* and *jihād*, as their fathers had done to be with the Mahdī – and I channelled this strong spirit of devotion and combat towards construction.⁷⁴

This devoted following gave 'Abd-al-Raḥman another lucrative income stream: the *zakāt*, or tribute, that *Anṣār* felt obliged to render to the Mahdī's heir.⁷⁵ These gifts, usually in kind, in the form of grain consignments, livestock or even land, added hugely to the family's wealth. al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq conceded that such tributes were 'among the most important means of capital accumulation within the company' but admitted that 'we have no information showing how the *Anṣār's zakāt* was spent after it reached the *Dā'ira*'. In February 1924, when George Dupuis, Deputy Governor of Darfur, asked for an accounting of the proceeds of *zakāt*, the reply came: £E 2,500 in sorghum and cattle. In his account, al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq admitted that 'this amount was probably

⁷³ NRO Khartoum, DARFUR 3/3/20, 7 August 1936, cited in Lidwien Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith and Sudanic Tradition: The History of the Masālīt Sultanate, 1970-1930* (London: Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 241.

⁷⁴ al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *'Ilāqāt al-intāj al-zirā'īa*, p. 61.

⁷⁵ The *zakāt*, a tax enjoined upon believers by the Koran, usually entails payment of one-fortieth of income (2½ per cent) and a tithe of crops and/or herds.

a lot less than the truth'.⁷⁶ In November 1931, Richard Owen, a White Nile Province official, rejected 'Abd-al-Raḥman's claims to several farm properties that he said had been donated by religious followers:

In most cases he has only obtained permission by intimating to the owner that he would very much like the plot, & the wretched owner, unless a definite anti-Mahdist, does not like to incur his displeasure & religious ban by refusing; - & when he does acquire the land he seldom employs local labour on it, but plants his nasty fanatical westerner adherents on it, who thief & brawl, & are a far more potential source of religious upheaval than any Mahdist elements of the Sudan itself.⁷⁷

Such loyalty also put both donors of *zakāt* and *muhājirīn* at odds with their own tribal leaders, many of whom resisted the spread of 'Abd-al-Raḥman's influence. A *muhājir* might bring a camel to Jazīra Abā but then be fined another camel on his return to Kordofan or Darfur. 'Abd-al-Raḥman turned this to his own advantage by telling the British it was fairer on such devotees for his own agents (*manādib*) to collect the *zakāt* discreetly, and 'save the donors from the enmity of their tribal leaders which the mere fact of the gift would bring down on them'.⁷⁸

On that point about agents, it is worth stressing the scale of 'Abd-al-Raḥman's ambitions. He had been sending out probes as early as 1916 and by the mid-1920s he had a network spread across White Nile, Blue Nile, Kordofan, Darfur and beyond. In 1923, the British were worried enough to circulate fliers warning that 'the Government did not recognise 'Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdi [omitting his title "al-Sayyid"] as anything but an ordinary citizen; and that ... anybody purporting to collect in his name, either in cash or kind, would be liable to arrest by the local or district authority'.⁷⁹ By 1924, he admitted to employing 24 agents, with only one temporarily assigned to Darfur: certainly a considerable understatement of the real situation.⁸⁰ This is what he gave as their job

⁷⁶ al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, '*Ilāqāt al-intāj al-zirā'īa*', p. 68. For Dupuis, see MacMichael, *Sudan Political Service*, p. 21.

⁷⁷ Letter dated 25 November 1931, in T.R.H. Owen Papers, SAD 414/3/35-6.

⁷⁸ 'Note of a Conversation', FO 141/573/1, ff. 52-3.

⁷⁹ Bedri and Hogg, *Babikr Bedri*, Vol. 2, p. 274.

⁸⁰ 'Memorandum', FO 371/12374, p. 11. See also Awad al-Sid al-Karsani, 'The Establishment of Neo-Mahdism in the Western Sudan, 1920-1936', *African Affairs* 86/344 (1987), pp. 395-8.

description, beyond acting as commercial and agricultural agents: 'They represent me in all affairs with local governors ... and in all interests I have with natives and are entrusted with anything that the natives wish to transmit to me.'⁸¹



Stacked sacks of cotton seed, al-Jazīra
(SAD.1/25/2)

These emissaries pushed further even than the western frontier of British-occupied Sudan. British officials in northern Nigeria complained about letters from 'Abd-al-Raḥman that claimed explicitly 'I am following in the footsteps of my father' and urged Muslims in West Africa to make the *hijra* to Jazīra Abā. If they fell by the wayside, he assured them, 'Allah will give them everlasting bliss'.⁸² This, commented one official in Nigeria tetchily, amounted to a 'very considerable and very nefarious' influence.⁸³

The influx added to the chores faced by the Kosti District Commissioner and his staff. One job was to count the huts on Jazīra Abā that housed the faithful

⁸¹ 'Memorandum', FO 371/12374, p. 10.

⁸² Cover letter (accompanying four sample letters), 30 March 1924, in National Archives, Kew, FO 141/573/1, ff. 6-17.

⁸³ 'Memorandum by Mr Rodd: Mahdism in the Sudan', 22 May 1924; *ibid.* f. 41. See also Mark Duffield, 'Fulani Mahdism and Revisionism in Sudan: "Hijra" or Compromise with Colonialism?', in *The Central Bilād Al-Sūdān* (eds. Yūsuf Fādl Ḥassan and Paul Doornbos) (Khartoum: KUP, 1977), pp. 283-305, for a detailed account of the Nigerian perspective.

in settlements demarcated for the Zaghāwa, Rizeigāt, Beni Hassan, and so on. 'There were about 6000 huts in 1936,' recalled Bill Henderson, 'and as they always showed an increase and nobody ever did anything about it ... the Sub-Governor of the White Nile persuaded the powers that were to discontinue this vexatious practice.' And if that weren't enough to drive a young colonial officer to the whisky bottle, the Kosti D.C. also had 'the unenviable task of assessing the profits of the Daira ... After laborious days in their accounts office he would produce figures which were completely nullified by information in the possession of the Finance Department in Khartoum.'⁸⁴

A routine tax inspection by Ian Douglas, a Khartoum-based Audit Inspector, revealed the extent to which the British administration was struggling to keep up with both the al-Mahdī family's devious accounting and the mass movement of people. Douglas was faced with assessing not just 'Abd-al-Rahman's cotton crops but his ginneries, arable farms, orchards, stables, livestock farms and spinning facilities.'⁸⁵ The audit also coincided with a religious festival, revealing the collision of their host's religious, political and financial interests. Rollo Bolton, representing White Nile Province at the audit, reported to his superiors that 'prayers were attended by a large crowd of devotees':

It later transpired that ... letters had gone out far and wide urging Mahdist sympathisers to be present at Abba at this particular festival. Sayed Abdel Rahman was then supposed to reveal himself as the Nebi Eisa, or prophet Jesus. Sudan Government Headquarters despatched a gun-boat to convey Sayed Abdel Rahman back to his town house in the capital. I had difficulty in persuading pilgrims to return home and Richard Palmer, ... the Resident of Northern Nigeria, came to Kosti to arrange with me how best to affect [*sic*] the return of his own parishioners.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ K.D.D. Henderson, *Set Under Authority: Being a Portrait of the Life of the British District Officer in the Sudan Under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, 1898-1955* (Castle Cary: n.p., 1987), p. 56; see also K.D.D. Henderson Papers, SAD 659/6, f. 43.

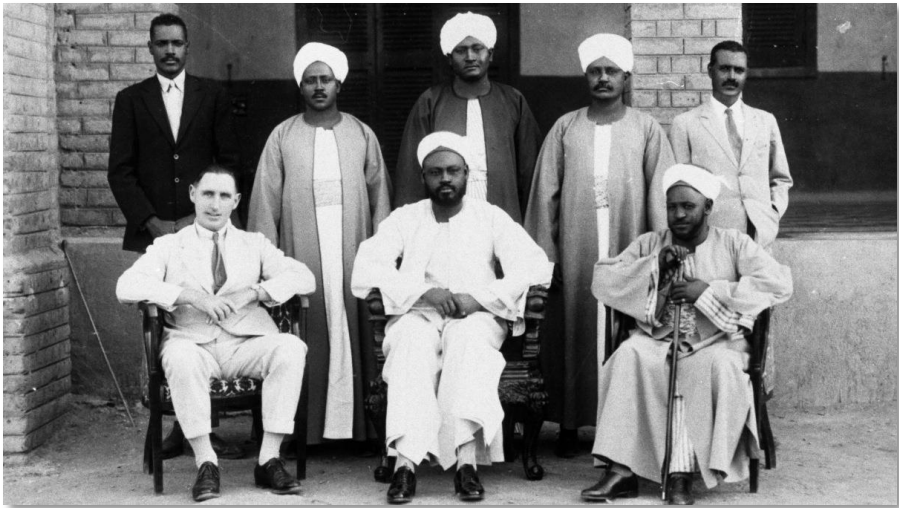
⁸⁵ Personal accounts of visiting Jazīra Abā can be found in: R.A. Hodgkin Papers, SAD 896/14, f. 41 (20 July 1945); I.M. Beasley Papers, SAD 657/5 f. 110 (30 May 1945) and SAD 657/7, ff. 1-19 (10 August 1945); and W.H.T. Luce Papers, SAD 828/2, f. 22 (30 October 1948).

⁸⁶ Account of visit to Jazīra Abā, in A.R.C. Bolton Papers, SAD 722/10, f. 3.

Such gatherings were enough to convince many in the Khartoum administration that, despite repeated protestations of loyalty, 'Mahdism was still a potential danger and needed to be watched'.⁸⁷

Formal launch of the Dā'irat al-Mahdī

All that remained, in business terms, was to bring together all these disparate and burgeoning ventures under official licence. Its first incarnation, as a loose conglomerate of interests known informally as the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī*, had existed in recognisable form as early as 1925, when it was registered under the Companies Ordinance of the same year.⁸⁸ On 18 December 1933, however, the *Dā'ira* was formally relaunched at a ceremony in Omdurman, with its Articles of Association specifically stating that the company was duly registered under the newer Business Registration Act 1931.⁸⁹



Front: N.R. Udāl, 'Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī and 'Alī al-Mahdī, March 1930
(SAD.778/13/6)

⁸⁷ Gawain Bell, 'The Growth of Sudanese Nationalism, Devolution and the Road to Independence', Sudan Historical Records Conference, University of Durham, 1982, in W.H. Glanville Papers, SAD 393/8, f. 31.

⁸⁸ al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *'Ilāqāt al-intāḥ al-zirā'a*, p. 70. For details of relevant colonial legislation, see 'Sudan Ordinances and Proclamations', in *The Revised Edition of the Laws of the Sudan from 1899 to 1926* (1st June) (3 vols.) (Khartoum: McCorquodale & Co., 1926-8), vol. 2, p. 905.

⁸⁹ al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *'Ilāqāt al-intāḥ al-zirā'a*, p. 70.

According to Ṣalāh Ḥassan, author of a biographical study of ‘Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl, it was ‘the expansion of the business that made a redistribution of the work hierarchy imperative’ – although he also refers to ‘circumstantial mishaps’ in the relationship between ‘Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl and his uncle that led the younger man to resign his position.⁹⁰ As for the British, the decision to license the company, according to Fatima Babiker Mahmoud, was again deliberately political, the latest attempt to ‘contain Sayid Abdel Rahman within the colonial regime through the favoured status he would acquire by engaging in business activities’.⁹¹

al-Ṣiddīq ‘Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, author of the only published article on the *Dā’irat al-Mahdī*, describes its ‘special significance’ in exclusively political terms: it was, he says, ‘set up in response to the political struggle that accompanied the advent of British colonial rule, together with the attempts of Imam ‘Abd-al-Raḥman to revive the spirit of Mahdism among its followers and faithful’.⁹² But was there not an irony, if not hypocrisy, in the son of the Mahdī – who despised worldly wealth – setting up the biggest Sudanese-owned business in the country? ‘Abd-al-Raḥman, now 48 years old, said that the rationale for the creation of the company went far deeper than this ‘imposing economic edifice’:

Its perspective was inspired by the teaching in Islam that private property without a social function is not permissible. ... The *Dā’ira* was set up as a collective, in which both migrants – *muhājirīn* – and settled followers – *Anṣār* – make their contributions. The *Dā’ira* is an economic institution whose business is carried out by men of zeal, who appreciate that it functions not for their personal interests but with the twin objectives of spiritual development and patriotism.⁹³

There are many stories attesting to the social welfare aspect of the *Dā’irat al-Mahdī*. There were donations to religious and secular schools, libraries and mosques.⁹⁴ A typical anecdote concerns Ḥassan Bileil, later Governor of Sudan’s

⁹⁰ Ṣalāh Ḥassan, *al-Sayyid ‘Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl al-Mahdī*, pp. 63 and 66-7.

⁹¹ Fatima Babiker Mahmoud, *The Sudanese Bourgeoisie*, p. 45.

⁹² al-Ṣiddīq ‘Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *‘Ilqāt al-intāj al-zirā’a*, p. 1.

⁹³ al-Ṣiddīq al-Mahdī, *al-Jazīra Abā*, pp. 10-11.

⁹⁴ Niblock, *Class and Power in Sudan*, p. 177, argues that these donations had an ulterior motive: building credibility among educated Sudanese.

Central Bank, whose father, a train driver, was killed in a workplace accident. When 'Abd-Al-Raḥman heard of the tragedy, he gave the family a monthly salary, which Ḥassan Bileil only stopped drawing when he graduated from university. Another anecdote compares 'Abd-Al-Raḥman's famed generosity to artists, poets and singers with the notorious stinginess of 'Ali al-Mīrghanī. When the poet Wad al-'Ubeid went to 'Ali al-Mīrghanī to complain of his dire financial situation, the Khatmīa leader responded with a pious recitation of the *fātiha*. When Wad al-'Ubeid then appeared before 'Abd-Al-Raḥman, the *imām* instructed his secretary to give him some money even before the poet had time to make his appeal. Hence the Wad al-'Ubeid saying: 'The *fātiha* of Abū-Elwa was cashed by Abū-Abda [both nicknames]'.⁹⁵ More seriously, as late as 1958, 'Abd-Al-Raḥman stated explicitly:

Know you that the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī* is an economic foundation, the purpose of which is securing the religious and social aims of the *Anṣār*. I have issued instructions to its Director ... to exert his efforts to open mosques and institutes and preserve the entity of the *Anṣār* and to work towards their welfare.⁹⁶

In its first decade, i.e. before receiving its official licence, the *Dā'ira's* expansion often flirted with illegality. Even four years after incorporation, the Jazīra Abā scheme still had more than 300 acres of 'unauthorised planted area'.⁹⁷ But the British were content to turn a blind eye, offering 'generous support regarding the business and growth of the *Dā'ira* ... with the aim of initiating a particular social and economic balancing act in the Sudan of that time'.⁹⁸ The *Dā'ira's* administrative sub-divisions proliferated. The original Agricultural Company was divided into the White Nile Company for Agricultural Schemes and the al-Nīleīn Agricultural Company. At its peak, the Real Estate Company owned 811,711 sq. metres of property. And, most diverse of all, the Commercial Company presided over the sale of cotton, sorghum and livestock, administered the *zakāt*, ran the

⁹⁵ These anecdotes are from an interview with Mubārak 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl, 8 May 2013.

⁹⁶ al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *'Ilāqāt al-intāḡ al-zirā'īa*, p. 63.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

Rabak Ginning Mill and bought a controlling stake in the *Haḡḡarat al-Sūdān* newspaper.⁹⁹

By 1939, in the words of the colonial expert Margery Perham, Jazīra Abā was ‘stamped with the unromantic mathematical pattern of irrigation’.¹⁰⁰ Such geometric designs also covered increasingly large areas on the east and west banks of the White Nile on either side of the island, an expansion that peaked in the mid-1940s. The largest plantations were on Jazīra Abā itself (30,000 acres) and at al-Malāḡa (18,300 acres).¹⁰¹ Smaller farms included 1,400 acres apiece at al-Shawwāl and al-Ṭawīla, and 1,200 acres at Qullī. There were many more besides, at Qundāl in Blue Nile Province, at Abū-Halīma near Khartoum, some as far north as Berber – altogether totalling 38,400 acres.¹⁰² As for the water supply, William Luce, then in the District Commissioner’s office at Kosti, left us a precise chart of all the main growing areas and their irrigation systems.¹⁰³

A family business

While ‘Abd-al-Raḡman was inevitably the focus of official attention, the *Dā’ira* was far from a one-man operation. Close family were indispensable. Indeed, the company’s Articles of Association state that the founding directors were four: ‘Abd-al-Raḡman; his one surviving brother, ‘Alī al-Maḡdī; his nephew, ‘Abdullāḡi al-Fāḡl; and another nephew, al-Fāḡl al-Bushra.¹⁰⁴

In the normal run of things, the older brother would expect to be the heir, temporal and spiritual. But after his release from prison in Rashīd in Egypt, ‘Alī refrained from contesting the role of *imām*, opting instead for a quiet life in the colonial civil service. He resigned in 1926 to work full-time for his brother, running the fledgling company’s Omdurman office for three years, until he retired

⁹⁹ On newspaper ownership and use, see Mahjoub Abd al-Malik Babiker, *Press and Politics in the Sudan* (Graduate College Publications No. 14) (Khartoum: KUP, 1985), pp. 38-47.

¹⁰⁰ Margery Perham, ‘Cotton and other Cultures: II. – Planning for Native Prosperity’, *The Times*, 7 June 1939, p. 17.

¹⁰¹ Niblock, *Class and Power in Sudan*, p. 33.

¹⁰² al-Ṭayyib Muḡammad Adam al-Zākī, *Al-‘Arsh wa’l-miḡrāb: al-dūr al-ijtimā’ī wa’l-iqtisādī li’l-imām ‘Abd-Al-Raḡman al-Maḡdī fī al-Sūdān al-ḡadīth* (‘The Throne and the Pulpit: The Social and Economic Role of Imām ‘Abd-Al-Raḡman al-Maḡdī in Modern Sudan’) (Cairo: Dar al-‘Alūm, 2005), pp. 257, 400 and 401. al-Ṣiddīq ‘Abd-al-Raḡman Azraq, *‘Ilāqāt al-intāḡ al-zirā’īa*, p. 66, puts the total of agricultural land (possibly including that owned by family members) at 49,081 acres, with no date given. See also Ṣalāḡ Ḥassan, *al-Sayyid ‘Abdullāḡi al-Fāḡl al-Maḡdī*, p. 61.

¹⁰³ The largest, at al-Malāḡa, was irrigated by a 14” pump that delivered 9.8 million cubic metres of Nile water; ‘Schemes of 8” and over growing cotton’ (1948), in W.H.T. Luce Papers, SAD 828/3, f. 13.

¹⁰⁴ al-Ṣiddīq ‘Abd-al-Raḡman Azraq, *‘Ilāqāt al-intāḡ al-zirā’īa*, p. 65.

to compile an oral history of their father's movement.¹⁰⁵ 'We came out of Karārī [the Battle of Omdurman] with no hope,' wrote one follower; 'there were two sons of the Mahdī, close in age. But 'Alī saw that his brother was more capable and gave way. Imagine if he had fought, where would the *Anṣār* be?'¹⁰⁶

'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl's role was even more pivotal. He was among the best-educated of the family, first at the Gordon College in Khartoum and then at Abū-Harāz Agricultural School near Sennār. In later life, he recalled the lack of options that led him, in 1916, to consider enrolling in the Sudan Defence Force. When he asked his uncle for permission, 'Abd-al-Raḥman begged him instead to help him build the community. 'I thought he was a dreamer,' 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl said, 'because we had no money then, him or me – but he saw what I didn't see.'¹⁰⁷ And so he gave his uncle 45 years of loyal service as his primary *wakīl*, or legal representative – continuing even after his resignation as Director-General in December 1933 – and he passed on his technical farming expertise to *Dā'ira* employees through training manuals and irrigation charts.

It was 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl who headed the business in its early years – i.e. before its formal existence as the licensed *Dā'irat al-Mahdī* – as the company's first Director-General. As such, his responsibilities included: personnel transfers; supervision of all company agents, including their reports and correspondence; oversight of revenue collection from the various schemes; monitoring of cotton prices; and crop sales.¹⁰⁸ He presided over a professionally run business. An outline of its organisational structure lists by name an eleven-member Board of Deputy directors, a Director-General of Schemes, three Agricultural Inspectors, twenty-seven Scheme Managers, fourteen Scheme Supervisors, fifty-five Accountants and Auditors, ten Mechanical Engineers for Pumps and Vehicles, seven Architects, and thirteen Administrators and Clerks.¹⁰⁹

The plantation at Jazīra Abā itself provided the template into which these personnel fitted. In its early phases, it was divided into three schemes: al-Ṭayyiba, al-Raḥmanīa and Dār al-Salām. Each had a Scheme Manager (*mudīr al-maṣhrū*), answerable directly to 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl and passing instructions down to their

¹⁰⁵ Hill, *Biographical Dictionary*, p. 49.

¹⁰⁶ 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl, quoted by his son Mubārak 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl, 8 May 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Mubārak 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl, 8 May 2013.

¹⁰⁸ Ṣalāh Ḥassan, *al-Sayyid 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl al-Mahdī*, pp. 64-5.

¹⁰⁹ al-Ṣādiq Dhaw al-Beit, *Tārīkh al-Jazīra Abā wa-hayāt al-imām 'Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī wa-usratuhu* ('A History of Jazīra Abā and the Life of Imām 'Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī and his Family') (Omdurman: Hurriya Press, 2000), pp. 48-9.

own Supervisors (*nuḡār*). In the Dār al-Salām scheme in 1934, for example, *al-Sheikh* 'Abdallah al-Madanī oversaw supervisors and subordinate staff on four separate farms.¹¹⁰

The Umma Party: completing the 'triangle of power'

As early as the late 1920s, 'Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī had begun gathering around him a second following: a coterie through which, in Tim Niblock's words, 'the attitudes and objectives of educated Sudanese (especially those of the senior graduates) were shaped and influenced by the religious/commercial establishment'.¹¹¹ This process culminated in the formation of the *Anṣār*'s political wing, the Umma Party, in May 1945.¹¹²

At the formal opening of the Umma Club in Omdurman, the heir apparent, al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman, was very much in the frame. It is safe to assume that the Umma's founding aims reflected those of the man holding the purse-strings:

The principle of the Party is "The Sudan for the Sudanese" and its object is "to work for the independence of the Sudan within its recognised geographical frontiers while preserving friendly relations with Great Britain and Egypt." ... What prompted us to form this Party was an urgent feeling that the time had come for responsible indigenous Sudanese opinion to organise itself and make the real wishes of the vast majority of the Sudanese known to the world, so that the foolish and irresponsible clamour of a minority that have been won over by propaganda from outside the Sudan should not be taken as an expression of genuine Sudanese feeling and exploited as such by Egypt.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Ṣalāh Ḥassan, *al-Sayyid 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl al-Mahdī*, p. 63.

¹¹¹ Niblock, *Class and Power in Sudan*, pp. 169-70. Abbas Ahmed Mohamad, *White Nile Arabs*, p. 168, notes that 'Abd-al-Raḥman's absorption in national politics 'halted the organizational activities of his missionaries in the White Nile ... [where] the religious and political leadership of the *Ansar* began to crystallize also in the hands of the tribal chiefs'.

¹¹² See Gabriel Warburg, 'From Ansar to Umma: Sectarian Politics in the Sudan, 1914-1945', *Asian and African Studies* 9/3 (1973), pp. 101-53.

¹¹³ Letter from founding Umma Party member, dated 1 May 1945, in J.A. Gillan Papers, SAD.723/11, f. 4.



Opening of the Umma Club, Omdurman, May 1945
(SAD.747/4/26)

The political scene in pre-independence Sudan was certainly much more complex than the conventional description of a sectarian divide between the *Anṣār* and the *Khatmīa*.¹¹⁴ It was true that many *Khatmīa* adherents feared that Britain was preparing to hand power to the Umma Party. Some even feared Sayyid 'Abd-al-Raḥman's monarchic aspirations. As a result, they pursued a link with Egypt – as, indeed, did some politicians who neither followed the *Khatmīa* nor opposed the *Anṣār*. Some, like the *Ashiqqa*, sought subordination to the Egyptian monarchy. The various strands evolved into two coalitions, the Independence Front and the pro-unity National Front. As always, British officialdom dithered, belatedly looking to the Socialist Republican Party as a vehicle to achieve Sudanese self-rule, possibly with dominion status but without indigenous sectarian labels.¹¹⁵

It is hard to disentangle the web of loyalties that made up the Umma Party, but it was a clever blend of family, business partners and sympathetic tribal

¹¹⁴ Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim has described this period in three authoritative articles in *Middle Eastern Studies (MES)*: 'Sayyid Abd Al-Rahman Al-Mahdi: A Master of Manipulation Manipulated, 1935-44', *MES* 38/2 (2002), pp. 123-48; 'The Neo-Mahdists and the British, 1944-47: From Tactical Co-operation to Short-Lived Confrontation', *MES* 38/3 (2002), pp. 47-72; and 'Sayyid Abd Al-Rahman Al-Mahdi: A Frustrating Fulfilment of a Dream, 1947-56', *MES* 39/4 (2003), pp. 1-34.

¹¹⁵ J.W. Kenrick, 'Reminiscences Around the Transfer of Power in the Sudan', Sudan Historical Records Conference, University of Durham, 1982, in W.H. Glanville Papers, SAD.393/8, f. 38.

leaders. In a list of the party's paltry 23 members in the First Parliament of 1954-8, Tim Niblock reveals that more than half had largely commercial credentials, many of which meshed with family ties:

'Abd-al-Raḥman 'Umar 'Abdallah: employee of the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī*
Aḥmad al-Amīr Maḥmūd: owner of a pump scheme; son of a prominent Mahdist leader

Bannaga Muḥammad al-Tūm: substantial tenant on the Gezira scheme

al-Fāḍl al-Bushra: grandson of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī

al-Fāḍl Maḥmūd 'Abd-al-Karīm: owner of substantial agricultural schemes; grandson of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī

Ibrāhīm Idrīs Habbāni: owner of agricultural schemes and commercial enterprises

Imām Dafa'Allah: substantial tenant on the Gezira scheme

Kamāl al-Dīn 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl: son of 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl al-Mahdī; owner of pump schemes and commercial enterprises

Muḥammad 'Abd-al-Baqī al-Makāshfī: prominent merchant; son of a religious leader

Muṣṭafa Ḥassan Muḥammad: merchant with trading interests covering the Western Sudan

'Uthmān Ishāq 'Adam: merchant, with a trading interest in Kutum
al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī: general manager of the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī*

Ya'qūb Hāmid Bābikr: prominent merchant; owner of a contracting business¹¹⁶

In this new context the function of the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī* was overtly political. al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq states baldly that 'the advancement of farmers' was no longer the focus of the *Anṣār's* 'theoretical drive or programmed vision' when it came to using the 'economic mechanisms of the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī*'.¹¹⁷ One small but vivid illustration of that specific function came in a message from an official in Kosti in October 1948, ahead of a big political demonstration in the capital: 'The Daira have been most unusually anxious and pressing [me] to write out a permit

¹¹⁶ Niblock, *Class and Power in Sudan*, pp. 66-75.

¹¹⁷ al-Ṣiddīq 'Abd-al-Raḥman Azraq, *'Ilāqāt al-intāj al-zirā'īa*, p. 57.

for enough petrol to send five lorries up from Aba loaded with chaps to Khartoum. I have resisted this and said it is unjustifiable [what] with there being a train.’¹¹⁸

Put simply, the defining role of the *Dā’irat al-Mahdī* – and its greatest legacy – was its financing of the independence movement. That role nearly destroyed the family finances. After all, the Egyptian government was bankrolling a huge pro-unity drive and it was left to the *Dā’ira* to counter it alone. When he was taken to task by the Egyptian journalist Muḥammad Ḥassanein Heikal for toadying to the British, ‘Abd-al-Raḥman likened the moribund Condominium to an Egyptian *hantūr*, or horse-drawn cart: ‘Would you expect me to talk to the horse or to the driver?’¹¹⁹ But by 1954, on the eve of independence and after a traumatic election defeat at the hands of the unionists, he was forced to beg the British for a loan of up to eight million Egyptian pounds, with all his property put up as security, simply to ‘offset the Egyptian money pouring in’.¹²⁰

The end of the Dā’ira

‘Abd-al-Raḥman did not live long after independence – long enough, however, to see democracy overthrown by General Ibrāhīm ‘Abbūd in the first of Sudan’s post-independence military coups. His death in March 1959 marked a crucial turning-point in the history of the family – and the nation. ‘Politically,’ noted an obituary in *The Times*, ‘his death is an event of the highest importance and in a country already showing signs of extensive instability its repercussions will need to be carefully watched. ... The Mahdī’s family are a strongly united clan and this fact may be the best guarantee of stability.’¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Letter from Kostj, dated 11 October 1948, in K.D.D. Henderson Papers, SAD.659/6, f. 62.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Mubārak ‘Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl, 8 May 2013.

¹²⁰ Douglas H. Johnson (ed.), *British Documents on the End of Empire: Sudan. Part II: 1951-1956* (London: The Stationery Office, 1998), p. 305.

¹²¹ *The Times*, 24 March 1959, in A.R.C. Bolton Papers, SAD 722/9, f. 25.



Anṣār mourners at 'Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī's funeral, Omdurman, March 1959
(SAD.747/7/6)

Three top jobs were up for contention: *imām* of the religious community, Director-General of the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī* and leader of the Umma Party. Did 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl, only son of 'Abd-al-Raḥman's older brother, expect to inherit the leadership of the *Anṣār* after more than four decades of loyal service? His family insists that he bowed out gracefully, receiving a Cadillac by way of thanks from al-Ṣiddīq.¹²² Other followers contest that version. According to one account, at the height of the argument over succession, the Deputy Chief Justice, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Nūr, an emissary trying to bring the two sides together, wept openly as he quoted the defeated 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl: 'My mission in this world is to destroy the house of Sayyid 'Abd-al-Raḥman'.¹²³

So al-Ṣiddīq, who had learned at the side of his father for his entire adult life, secured the triple inheritance. Would he have maintained the cohesion of the clan if he had not died of a heart attack in 1961, at the age of 49?¹²⁴ Admirers believe he could have been a towering force for good.¹²⁵ 'Intelligent and wise,' wrote the journalist Muḥammad Kheir al-Badawī, 'had he lived he would have

¹²² Interview with Mubārak 'Abdullāhi al-Fāḍl, 8 May 2013.

¹²³ Interview with Muḥammad Kheir al-Badawī, 14 March 2013.

¹²⁴ Obituary from *The Times*, no date, in A.R.C. Bolton Papers, SAD 722/9, f. 2.

¹²⁵ al-Ṣādiq Dhaw al-Beit, *Tārīkh al-Jazīra Abā*, pp. 51-3, contains a favourable description of al-Ṣiddīq's management techniques at the *Dā'irat al-Mahdī*.

been greater than his father – or even his grandfather.’ He cites an example: when the *Anṣār* clashed with ‘Abbūd’s troops at the Prophet’s birthday (*mawlid al-Nabī*) celebrations in Omdurman, with blood shed on both sides, his followers begged him to authorise a mass uprising. al-Ṣiddīq said: ‘The *Anṣār* were entrusted to me, and by God I shall not leave them to be killed. Shame on me if I meet my God and a single drop of *Anṣār* blood has been spilt in vain on my orders.’¹²⁶ Put in less emotional language to the *Daily Telegraph*, al-Ṣiddīq said: ‘I am the only man in this country who could raise a war or a rebellion [against the military] ... but I would not do it.’¹²⁷

al-Ṣiddīq’s death was the beginning of the clan’s disintegration. Presciently, he had stipulated in his will that a five-man council from the immediate family should select his successor – a selection that must then be endorsed by the *Anṣār*.¹²⁸ But the succession of al-Hādī, al-Ṣiddīq’s younger brother, prompted a split with al-Ṣiddīq’s son, al-Ṣādiq. al-Hādī became *imām*, al-Ṣādiq divided the Umma Party, and the *Dā’irat al-Mahdī* staggered on, struggling with the massive debts built up over years of political struggle. When the end came, it brought al-Hādī’s end, too: another military coup, this time led by Jā’far Nimeiri in 1969, and another, much larger armed confrontation between Sudan’s new rulers and the *Anṣār* at Jazīra Abā. In the approving words of Anthony Sylvester, ‘It was Nimeiri who put an end to their power.’¹²⁹

Two Arabic phrases sum up the demise of the *Dā’irat al-Mahdī* in the summer of 1970: *al-ḥirāsāt al-‘amm*, ‘general sequestration’, and *al-islāh al-zirā’a*, ‘agricultural reform’.¹³⁰ Aḥmad Suleimān, Minister of Economics and Foreign Trade in Nimeiri’s Revolutionary Government, said the sweeping programme of nationalisation and confiscation was designed ‘so that in the end our people may reap the benefits that were going to a handful of merchants.’¹³¹ New laws to speed up the process were bolstered by a Central Bureau for Public Control Act.¹³² A clash was not long in coming. Details of the brief but violent conflict are

¹²⁶ Muḥammad Kheir al-Badawī, *Quṭār al-‘amr*, pp. 136-7.

¹²⁷ Interview in *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 April 1960, cited in *Middle East Record*, Vol. 2 (1961), p. 469.

¹²⁸ The five were ‘Abdullāhi al-Fādl, al-Hādī al-Mahdī, Yahya al-Mahdī, Aḥmad al-Mahdī and al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī; article in the *Middle East Mirror*, 21 October 1961, cited in *ibid.*, p. 470.

¹²⁹ Anthony Sylvester, *Sudan Under Nimeiri* (London: Bodley Head, 1977), p. 59.

¹³⁰ Interview with ‘Osmān Nuṣairi, 11 April 2013.

¹³¹ ‘Statement on the Nationalization of Cotton Exporting Firms and Reorganization of its Trade’, in *Sudan Almanac 1970-1: An Official Handbook* (Khartoum: Government Printing Press, 1971), p. 218.

¹³² Fatih El Rahman Abdalla El Sheikh, *The Legal Regime of Foreign Private Investment in Sudan and Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp. 127-8.

contested: as Mansūr Khālīd has put it, ‘the Ansar tend to exaggerate their losses, while authority tends to exaggerate Ansar armaments’.¹³³ But there were certainly many thousands of deaths in the government bombing and strafing of Jazīra Abā, and the new *imām*, al-Hādī ‘Abd-al-Raḥman, was killed in murky circumstances during an escape bid for the Ethiopian border: yet another member of the al-Mahdī clan who died short of his 50th birthday.

As for the *Dā’irat al-Mahdī*, it died in 1970. Company records and archives were destroyed when the company was confiscated. Family properties were eventually reinstated but the agricultural heart of the operation, built up so painstakingly by ‘Abd-al-Raḥman, had been ripped out. Agricultural ‘reform’ turned out to be agricultural paralysis: with the death of the big private schemes on the White Nile, planted land today is estimated to be less than 5 per cent of what it once was.¹³⁴ But Jazīra Abā still retains its place as the heartland of the movement. The *Anṣār* – those at least that have not been co-opted by Sudan’s latest military-led autocracy – still hope that they will see a day when they reclaim a place in the running of the country. It is unlikely, however, to match the weight of the contribution made by the great clan patriarch, Sayyid ‘Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī, and his *Dā’irat al-Mahdī*.

¹³³ Mansour Khalid, *Nimeiri and the Revolution of Dis-May* (London: KPI, 1985), p. 18.

¹³⁴ al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī, *al-Jazīra Abā*, p. 17, describes a visit by the author to the Jazīra Abā scheme in the winter of 1979-80, a decade after Nimeiri’s confiscation: ‘In the 1969-70 season, an acre produced 6 *quntār* of cotton; in the current season, an acre produced just half a *quntār* – and the population in the district had dropped from 60,000 to 40,000’.